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ARE YOU SORRY YOU CAME TO THIS COUNTRY?

AN ADDRESS
TO CITIZENS OF THE UNITED STATES
OF GERMAN BIRTH OR ANCESTRY.

By C. J. Ernst

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Council of Defense.

1917.

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Ernst was born in the province of Silesia, Prussia, in 1854, and graduated from the "Buergerischule," now called "Mittelschule," in the City of Goerlitz, in April 1868. With his father, mother and one younger sister he landed at Castle Garden in May, 1868, and at Nebraska City May 23, 1868. For further details see J. Sterling Morton History of Nebraska, Vol. 2, page 643.

In February, 1917, Mr. Ernst was urged to address a large gathering of "new citizens" and "citizens-to-be", all told about 400 or more, on "Naturalization Night," at the Omaha Commercial Club rooms. He had never before attempted such a thing and for that reason was very reluctant to agree to it. However, his address received such rapt attention from his audience, and created such enthusiasm, that it was at once published in full by the "Omaha Nebraskan" (issue of Feb. 15, 1917) under the title "The Story of an Emigrant Boy," and after that the Commercial Club of Omaha had a large number printed, in booklet form, for general distribution. Later on, the Nebraska City Patriotic Committee urged Mr. Ernst to be one of the speakers at a great patriotic meeting held May 11, 1917, with which invitation he complied because Nebraska City was his first place of residence in the United States, from 1868 to 1876. Again, when the Nebraska State Council of Defense decided to have a great public gathering at Columbus, Nebraska, on July 1, 1917, it urged Mr. Ernst to be one of the speakers on that occasion. While the three addresses, each to a differently constituted audience, varied considerably, the same fundamental purpose, ideas and arguments, were contained in all. Mr. Ernst's Columbus address was printed in full in the "Omaha Nebraskan," of July 5, 1917, and in the "Kearney Hub" of July 12, 1917. Since then

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many requests for copies have been received by the State Council of Defense which could not possibly be supplied, no extra copies of these papers having been printed, so that the supply was soon exhausted.

For that reason Mr. Ernst's Columbus address, very slightly revised by him, is now printed in this booklet form for the purpose of general distribution.

Mr. Ernst is the Assistant Treasurer of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad Company, for its lines west of the Missouri River, at Omaha, and has been in the service of that company for more than 41 years. Although never an active politician and never elected to public office by his own initiative or seeking, he was nominated a non-partisan candidate for member of the schoolboard at Lincoln, Nebraska, about 25 years ago, endorsed by both the Republican and Democratic conventions, serving one term of three years, declining to be a candidate for a second term. Some years afterwards, again without any suggestion or solicitation originating with him, he was elected a member of the board of regents of our State University, serving one term of six years, two years as president, but declining to be a candidate for a second term. Likewise, in 1914, the "Citizens Committee" of Omaha insisted on his standing for election as a member of the Omaha schoolboard, and he is now serving his third consecutive term as president of that board. The year 1917 therefore will complete 12 years of absolutely gratuitous public service rendered by him to his fellow citizens.

MR. ERNST'S COLUMBUS ADDRESS

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, FELLOW CITIZENS:

As I look over this splendid audience I fail to notice the presence of any native Americans. If there are any such present I am unable to identify them from this platform. The only native American is the American Indian. It is even doubted whether he, too, did not originally come from elsewhere, since archaeologists find many proofs of the existence of a prehistoric people, right here in our State of Nebraska, of an apparently different type from the American Indian, with whose present existence and history of recent centuries we are very well acquainted. Of the more than one hundred million inhabitants of our country only approximately 300,000 are true natives, i. e. American Indians. All the balance of us are foreigners, either by birth or ancestry, it matters not whether one's ancestors came over with Columbus, or crossed on the Mayflower, or whether you or I were born in some other country and came here as immigrants. I myself was born a subject of the king of Prussia. Therefore I am addressing you, foreigners of recent or remote degree, from the viewpoint of an American citizen of German birth, who received all of his school education in Germany.

Even the people in my native land came there, it is true a long time ago, from the East, emigrating as we have ever since been doing, toward the West, taking possession of the land which pleased them, just as the Children of Israel took possession of Palestine and claimed it, by possession, for their future home. Just as the Children of Israel in the desert erred for a short time by sighing for the fleshpots of Egypt, where they had long been held in bondage, so possibly some few of our foreign-born population in this country, have within recent years, had similar delusions or dreams about returning to their native land to live the balance of their

lives in ease and comfort, upon the wealth accumulated by them since they came to this country as foreign immigrants with very limited means, or none at all.

This country of ours, the United States of America, is made up of people from every country on earth, with Europeans very greatly in the majority. Great Britain supplied a large share of the population of the original thirteen colonies, although France and Holland were likewise well represented, and former English subjects fought their mother country in the Revolutionary war under the leadership of George Washington, an Englishman by ancestry. Germany, Holland, France, the three Scandinavian countries, Austria, and to some extent Russia, have all furnished large numbers of the very best of young and middle aged men and women, to rapidly swell the population and advance the material development of this new and undeveloped empire (without an emperor) of America. During the last decade or two Italy, Greece and other southern and southeastern countries of Europe have sent us hundreds of thousands of sturdy workmen, as laborers for our railroads and other important public and private enterprises. Here we all breathe the same air, eat the same food, work side by side, live in the same towns, and often in the very next adjoining house, no matter how separated we were geographically, politically, socially, or otherwise, on the other side of the Atlantic, but we never yet had a European race war as residents, neighbors, and fellow citizens of these United States. In my own city of Omaha we have people from every race and speaking every tongue of Europe. At least sixteen or seventeen modern European languages are spoken and known to be represented by the citizenship of Greater Omaha. Within a block or two of my own residence I know personally people who themselves, not their ancestors, came from practically every one of the greater nations of Europe now engaged in war. We have no quarrels, we do not ignore or despise each other

because of our having been born in different countries which are now at war. We speak to each other, we greet each other, since the war as before, as neighbors and acquaintances and fellow citizens of this; the greatest and all-around best country on earth.

Why did you or I, or our fathers or mothers, or our ancestors farther removed, leave those various lands of our or their nativity, and emigrate to America? Why did they, or you, or I, renounce further allegiance to the respective foreign potentate and swear all future allegiance to the Stars and Stripes? There must be a reason for it, and it must be a good, strong, generally and thoroughly recognized reason, since millions upon millions have taken that same solemn oath, to which my own father swore, without the least equivocation, mental reservation or secret evasion whatsoever, at Nebraska City, in 1868, and again in 1873, when he received his final papers.

Did you, my fellow citizens, who were born abroad, mean exactly what you swore to? I am sure you did. Were your ancestors, my American-born fellow-citizens, serious and honest in their intentions and declarations of the same kind? I am sure of it.

Again, I ask one and all of foreign birth here present, why did you or I, or anyone else, ever leave his native European land and cross the great and sometimes dangerous Atlantic, to become a citizen of the United States of America? Was it not because we believed this to be THE LAND OF GREATER AND MORE NEARLY EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES? Was it not from a desire to greatly improve our conditions? Was it not in the hope and expectation of better prospects, greater political, religious and social liberty and equality, that immigration from all countries of Europe now at war has been coming in a great and quite steady stream, even before, and ever since, the Declaration

of Independence was signed by the founders of our government.

How many of you, of foreign birth like myself, could possibly have enjoyed all of the temporal blessings and prosperity you have found here, if you had remained in your native land? Ask yourself that question, ask and answer it, honestly and sincerely, to your own conscience; you need not answer it to me, you prosperous business men, you well-to-do farmers, of Nebraska, or of any other place under these Stars and Stripes. Are you sorry that you came to this country, or that your fathers or mothers, or farther removed ancestors, came to this country? If there is any man or woman within the hearing of my voice who sincerely believes that he or she would prefer to "trade back," and return, to again become a citizen under any European government, no matter which one, let him or her, as soon as this awful war is ended, secure a United States passport, which is good for two years, then go to your choice of places in Europe, and try it out thoroughly, study conditions carefully, honestly, intelligently, on the ground, not at long range, or from a hazy distance, and I predict that every one who tries that will return, within a year at most, a far better, more enthusiastic and loyal citizen of the United States. Remember, I am not speaking of those, with large means, who go to Europe merely for pleasure, be it for a few months, or several years, prepared to spend money freely and liberally. People of that sort can amuse themselves and have much pleasure and comfort almost anywhere on earth nowadays.

In European countries there are classes or caste distinctions in bewildering numbers and variations. A member of the nobility will hesitate to associate closely with those who hold no such titles. A high military officer will associate only insofar as he cannot avoid it with those of lesser rank. Bankers are, socially, in a group by themselves and do not

mix to any extent with the manufacturers. The manufacturer is in a class by himself and will not mix very much, except in a strict business way, with the wholesale merchant. The wholesale merchant keeps away, except as his business may require, from the retailer, and the retailer considers himself above the small farmer, and the farmer above the laborer. These examples, as you know, could be multiplied in many directions. There is an ever, and everywhere present, caste distinction in these European countries, which does not exist in this country. It is true we sometimes and in some places seem to be drifting toward such conditions, but, in the final analysis, that is true with us, after all, only to a very limited extent.

The possession of much money has perhaps created somewhat of a money aristocracy in this country, and so-called "society" people may draw lines as to whom they will recognize in social affairs or at their homes or clubs, but after all that is nothing, absolutely nothing, compared to the caste distinctions made in our native lands across the sea.

In business matters in this country, social divisions disappear almost entirely. I am personally acquainted with the president of one of the biggest railroad companies in the United States who started in railroad work as a section laborer. In due course of time he became a fireman, later a locomotive engineer, and his wonderful ability continued to promote him until today he is one of the most prominent railroad presidents in the United States.

I know personally another railroad president whose company operates almost ten thousand miles of railroad, who, but a few years ago, was a young law student, then entered the office of a prominent law firm, was soon discovered to have a splendid head on him, was taken from that office to the general law offices of a certain railroad company, and in a comparatively few years became and is now the presi-

dent of that company, recognized as one of the ablest and leading railroad presidents in the United States.

Among the great public servants of the United States you need only study the life of Abraham Lincoln to understand what I am trying to impress upon you. He was not a foreign immigrant, but he was a poor boy whose opportunities of learning at school were quite limited.

Carl Schurz was once a foreign immigrant, leaving his native land because of disagreement with then existing political conditions, and in due course of time he became one of the truly big men in the public life of these United States.

There are thousands of such examples, where not only the poorest and plainest of American-born citizens have become leaders in their locality, if not in the nation, but there are also other thousands of examples where poor immigrants from Europe with live brains, good hearts and plenty of energy have been exceedingly successful, and have been greatly respected and honored in business and in public life by their American-born acquaintances, associates and fellow citizens.

This country, however, has no room for those who accept the privileges and enjoy the advantages of citizenship but are at the same time unwilling to accept its duties and responsibilities. No man can serve two masters, and therefore he cannot be half American and half something else, be it Pro-German, or pro-anything else except Pro-United States, and especially at this time, unless he belies the oath he took when he swore allegiance to the Stars and Stripes.

And when your country, the constitution of which you have sworn to defend, is at war, no matter if it unfortunately happens to be with the very country which gave you birth, it is your duty, and my duty, and the duty of every citizen without any exception whatsoever, to stand up for your country, the country that has prospered and protected you and now needs your utmost loyalty, and it is impossible for you or me, as individual citizens, to know exactly what is going on behind the scenes, or to know exactly what is necessary in order that peace may be restored at the earliest possible date and under the most proper conditions to insure the greatest lasting good and the blessing of liberty and pursuit of happiness to the peoples of the world, to establish liberty and democracy and equality among men and nations on a more firm and general basis, and to overthrow autocracy and that dreadful war spirit which has destroyed millions of lives and made millions of cripples, widows and orphans within the brief period of the last three years. Do not let us assume, any of us, that we, individually, know more and better how this government of ours shall be conducted under such awful and trying conditions, than those appointed, or elected by us, to manage these matters for us.

Before a state of war with Germany was officially declared it may have been, and to a reasonable and decent extent was, perfectly proper for us to argue our differing opinions on that important and most serious subject, but that period of freedom of expression concerning approval or criticism of our own government ended suddenly, emphatically and wholly when we were officially declared in a state of war with Germany.

When our country is at war, no matter with whom, every one of us belongs and can only belong to one of two classes.
WE ARE TODAY EITHER LOYAL CITIZENS OF THIS OUR NATIVE OR ADOPTED LAND, OR ELSE

WE ARE TRAITORS. The neutral or "half-baked" citizen, in time of war, is an impossible conception.

My father came to this country, not because he was a pauper laborer of Europe, as many immigrants have been most unfairly designated, but because he was then, fifty years ago, opposed to Prussian militarism and autocracy, just as I am opposed to it today. The German race has been a liberty loving and liberty seeking race for centuries, its greatest poets have written beautiful lines about liberty, but it will never attain to true liberty and equal rights for its people until its present form of government, the most militaristic and autocratic existing in Europe today, has been so changed and amended as to eliminate these features in their most objectionable forms and extent, and substitute for them a constitutionally much limited monarchy, giving every citizen an universal equal and secret ballot, maintaining an army only to the extent of a national police force and for the discipline and physical development of its young men, not at such enormous expense and as a menace to the peace of the world. The present extreme militarism and autocracy of Germany must be overthrown and a government of the people by the people and for the people established in its place; whether its chief head be called king, emperor, or president is not the most important detail. Genuine equality and democracy is the main issue and the future peace of the world must be the outcome of this horrible butchery or it will all have been in vain. Do not, however, expect it to happen by revolution as in Russia, or you will be disappointed. Germany must and will reorganize itself, after the eyes of its people, largely blinded by its present officialdom and military machine, will be opened to a clearer vision of themselves and their correct relations to the rest of the world. And we, as American citizens of German birth or ancestry, must not be political sympathizers of the Kaiser and his autocratic military machine and regime. Is it not

a fact that a great many of us, or our ancestors, came to this country primarily for the very purpose of getting away from those conditions? How inconsistent for any of us to now support what we once condemned or detested! If we would help our friends or relatives in yonder beautiful spot of earth called Germany we can do it better by supporting our own United States Government than by hindering or opposing its purposes in the present war, by word or deed, for those purposes, if successful, as they must and will be, will sooner or later accrue to the great and lasting good of Germany, the German people and the rest of the world.

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